

THE SEX CENSUS 2012
THE REPORT

Foreword from the experts



Jacqueline Gold, Chief Executive Officer, Ann Summers

“The importance of sex in a relationship should never be underestimated. Ann Summers is a business that understands this more than most, and Relate a charity that sees the reality of this every day.

Nearly two years ago Ann Summers and Relate began to discuss the possibility of launching together a sex census which would offer a unique and detailed insight in to the sex lives of the nation. Both parties recognised how important it was to understand what was happening between the nation’s sheets and how sex affected relationships today.

Our aim was to create a credible piece of research that could be referred to when it comes to understanding and monitoring sexual attitudes and behaviour in the UK. We wanted to allow people to feel comfortable talking about sex and the role this plays in their relationship.

Two years on and we are jointly publishing the results of the most informative sex survey the UK has ever seen, a survey that was completed by over 20,000 men and women. The results are surprising, exciting, informative and thought provoking.

The main aim for all of us was to get the UK talking about their sex lives, and if this report encourages just one couple to talk more then we have all done our job.”



Paula Hall, Sex Therapist, Relate

“Sex should be great: it should be exciting, fun, relaxing, exhilarating, romantic, intimate and erotic. What’s more, research tells us it’s good for our emotional and physical health. And it helps us build stronger couple relationships. But enjoying a good sex life takes more than just luck; it takes work and commitment too.

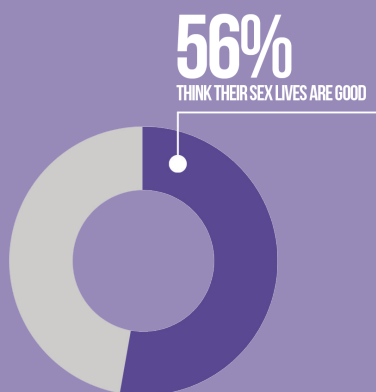
It’s important to remember that our sex lives do not exist within a void. They’re impacted by how we feel about ourselves, our partners and families, our day-to-day lives and the messages we receive from the media and society. In this report you’ll get an overview of the state of UK sex lives in 2012. You’ll see that, on the whole, men and women across all sexualities, young and old, are enjoying their sex lives. This is in spite of many people not knowing what ‘good’ sex really means. You’ll see that each generation has its ups and downs, but the 26–39-year-olds seem to be challenged more than most.

You may be surprised to learn that, despite our increased openness as a society, there are significant numbers of people struggling with physical sexual problems – and many still find it difficult to talk openly to their partner about sex. And even as pornography becomes increasingly prevalent in almost every format, you’ll see there are still gender differences when it comes to its use, and a lot of ambivalence about its impact on relationships. Finally, you might be interested to discover a new favourite among men’s sexual fantasies!”



How often & how happy

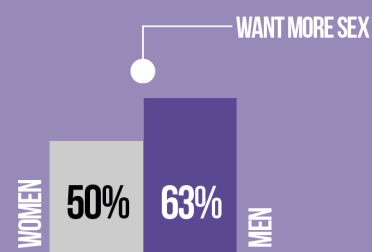
Sex and relationships are inextricably linked and the responses show that, on the whole, and across all sexual orientations, people in relationships consider themselves to have a good sex life (61%) and 53% believe that sex is better when they're in a relationship. A further 26% said it depends on the partner and only 3% of people said they thought sex was better when they were single. So the vast majority of people enjoy better sex when they're in a relationship – especially when it's with the right partner.



When it comes to sexual orientation, those defining themselves as lesbian, straight and bisexual were all similar in their responses, but unfortunately 26% of gay respondents said they aren't having a good sex life. However, it should be noted that the sample size for gay men in particular was low (0.9% of total respondents). What was interesting was the high number of bisexual respondents (8% of those who told us their sexuality), especially women. 11% of women identified themselves as bisexual in comparison to 3% of men. The high overall number of bisexual participants could be because there is a growing number of people experimenting with bisexuality or because bisexuality is finally beginning to lose its stigma.

10% of people within a relationship said they aren't having good sex, and this figure did increase with the length of time people had been together. However, 1 in 3 who have been in a relationship for 30 to 40 years reported that they still sometimes have a good sex life.

The frequency of sex is quite high compared to some other surveys – for example the Channel 4 Great British Sex Survey found the average was once a week – but it seems that many people still don't feel it's enough. Although our study found that 44% of people are having sex at least every few days, 50% of women and 63% of men would like more. Perhaps this is because the more we have it, the more we want it.



When asked how happy people are with their sex life, a surprising one in three respondents answer 'not sure.' This raises the question of how people evaluate the quality of the sex they're having. Rating your sex life is a purely subjective evaluation and yet a significant number of people are unsure on how to decide what's 'good'. With so much in the media about 'how to have great sex', it's possible that people feel they have to judge themselves on a checklist imposed by what society deems is good. Perhaps for those of us in the UK, even our sex lives have to 'live up to the Joneses', so we need to know what others consider good in order to reach an opinion. In reality, of course, the definition of a happy sex life is one where both sexual partners enjoy it – and there are countless ways for that to be achieved.



Problems in the bedroom

Our survey asked what issues people experience when it comes to sex. Unfortunately the statistics are still very similar to those published by Laumann, who published one of the largest surveys of sexual attitudes and behaviors in the U.S. nearly 15 years ago. Difficulties experiencing orgasm are the most common problem for women (28%), followed by lack of sexual desire (16%) and pain (12%). Worryingly 68% of women under 25 say they encounter problems reaching orgasm. Low desire has become less of an issue for women (Laumann reported 33%), but it seems that, in spite of this and even with greater sexual freedom, young women are still not enjoying sex to the full – or perhaps their younger partners have not yet developed the necessary skills.

Fifteen years on from Laumann's landmark survey, our study found that the picture is still similar for men, with 15% saying that premature ejaculation is a problem, while 10% cite erection difficulties and low desire affects 8%.

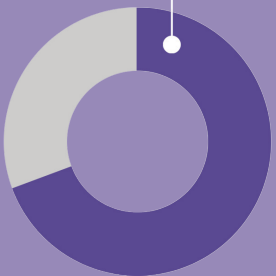
There are many things that can impact someone's sex life. For men the top three negative factors are tiredness (24%), low body confidence (12%) and work (11%). Women's top three issues are body confidence (22%), tiredness (20%) and low self-esteem (14%). Low body confidence and low self-esteem are rated by both genders as the second (34%) and third (21%) biggest passion wreckers.

Across the board, women's confidence is lower than men's, but women's confidence does seem to increase with age. There continues to be much debate about the impact that the media has on women's confidence. Young women are continually bombarded with impossible physical standards that dictate the right weight, the right shape and the right clothes they need in order to be sexy. Fortunately it seems that by the time women reach 40, their sexual confidence increases, before peaking between 60 and 69.

Nearly everyone, both men and women, agree that you have to work at a sex life (92% of men and 90% of women). Both genders are more or less equal in their ability to talk openly about sex, but unfortunately only half of respondents are able to describe themselves as 'very open' when talking with a sexual partner. Perhaps this demonstrates that sex education needs to be much more than biology, tips and tricks, but also how to feel good about yourself and talk about what you desire.

68%

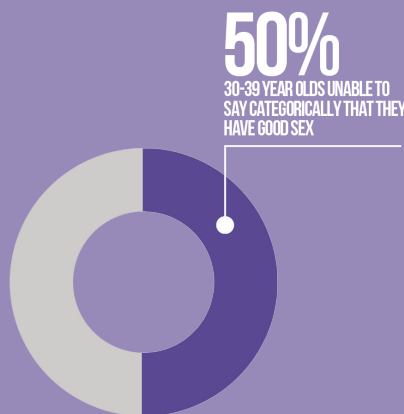
WOMEN UNDER 25 ENCOUNTER PROBLEMS REACHING ORGASMS





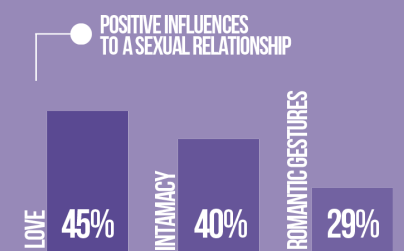
The sexually challenged inbetweeners

When comparing age groups, there's a notable difference in the perceived quality of sex lives and frequency of sex. Perhaps the freedom of youth and the excitement of embarking on a sexual relationship keeps the under 25s happy – in spite of a few physical problems. And once the age of 40 is reached, it might be that there is more acceptance of the ups and downs of life and relationships: while sex may be less frequent at this stage in life, there are plenty of other fulfilling activities to balance it out. But it seems the in-between years are more challenging than any other for those seeking a happy sex life.



The most sex-starved sector of the population is the 30–39-year-olds, with 55% of women and 71% of men wanting more. This could be due to the pressures of family life and raising children experienced by this age group. The 30–39-year-olds are also the least satisfied with the quality of their sex life, with 50% unable to say categorically that they have good sex.

Previous research by Relate showed that people in their 30's were the most time-poor of any group and this is further confirmed with more than 1 in 5 people saying tiredness was getting in the way of their sex life. Other negative influences cited were financial worries (25%) and children (35%). Many couples in their 30's are struggling to balance a new family with the pressures of work and maintaining friendships and a social life. Perhaps it's inevitable that sex will be different during these times but with better communication, couples can navigate through these years.



Spicing things up

There are many different things that can spice up a sexual relationship, but the most positive influences are still love (45%), intimacy (40%) and romantic gestures (29%). Both genders agree that these are the top three positive influences on their sex life, which is good news for everyone as it implies that people are, in this respect at least, on the same wavelength about sex.

When it comes to trying new things, it seems that 18–21-year-old women are the boldest (35%), although it could be argued that at that age, there are a lot of new things to try. In fact women under 30 think that they are much more adventurous than men in the same age group, with 72% of women wanting to try new things compared to only 34% of men.

However, despite more women saying they want to try something new, it's a different story when it comes to which gender suggests being more sexually adventurous to their partner. Some 46% of men compared to just 21% of women say they are the ones who suggest trying something new to a partner. This finding takes us back again to the importance of communication when it comes to our sex lives.

When it comes to initiating sex it seems that men and women also have a different view. Some 20% of women say they initiate sex but when men were asked who initiated, only 8% said it was their partner. This may be because the genders tend to have very different ways of initiating sex. It's been known for many years that female sexual desire is 'proceptive', whereas men's tends to be 'proactive'. What this means is that while women will make it obvious that they want to have sex, men are more likely to actively pursue a sexual encounter. A typical scenario would be when a woman dresses seductively and becomes more affectionate – if her partner doesn't notice or pick up on the cues she may just assume they are not interested rather than asking directly. These subtle differences in sexual initiation can cause conflict between partners unless they're able to recognise, understand and respect this potential disparity.

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Pornography

There is still a big gender split when it comes to pornography use: just 19% of women use it once a week or more, compared to 58% of men. And 41% of women use pornography once a month or more, compared to 76% of men. For many years it's been said that women are more interested in pornography when there is a relational component – for example where there is a storyline that details part of a relationship rather than just images of sex – while men are more visually stimulated by images; but our survey says differently. Although a significantly higher proportion of men use pornography regularly, the choices made by men and women are remarkably similar.

There is almost no difference at all between the genders when it comes to accessing pornography on the internet, while slightly more women than men use adult TV channels and buy their porn on DVD. The only variations are that women are still bigger consumers of erotic literature and twice as many men access live sex cams from their computers or via their phone.

However, another very interesting fact comes from our statistics. Throughout our survey people had the option to say they weren't comfortable answering the question: for both men and women, pornography was one of the questions that caused the most discomfort. For those who were confident answering the question, twice as many women as men were uncomfortable saying where they accessed it. This might signify that both men and women are uncomfortable talking about their pornography use, in spite of its increasing prevalence. And although our survey suggests that women are now accessing pornography in a similar way to men, there is still considerable stigma and shame around its use, especially for women.

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When asked if pornography has a negative impact on their relationship, more young people think it has, or are unsure if it has, compared to the older generation. It seems that older people are more confident about the impact of using pornography; it might also be that perhaps it's just that they use it less. Or it could be that as people get older they realise that pornography might not be a realistic portrayal of sexual behaviour.

Undoubtedly the unprecedented explosion of internet pornography over the past ten years has meant that more and more young people have been brought up with easy, anonymous access. Pornography use is now a part of many young people's everyday lives and hence its impact is bound to be greater than it was previously. With the significant gender differences in the amount of pornography consumed, it might be easy to assume that it's women who are more concerned, but the figures are exactly the same – 41% of both men and women are unsure about the impact pornography has on their relationship. It might be that the growing awareness of the potential pitfalls of pornography use is creating anxiety and confusion. This will be a particularly interesting statistic to follow in future reports.

Fantasies

No sex survey is complete without enquiring about fantasy. Sexual fantasy is a uniquely human sexual behaviour that varies considerably from individual to individual. Some like to share and act out their fantasies, while others prefer to keep them to themselves so they can be indulged privately. There have been many surveys over the years about what men and women like; our study shows that the old favourites such as threesomes, sex in different places and sex with our partner continue to be high on the list for both men and women. Having sex outside our orientation continues to be much higher on women's lists than men's, while a new fantasy for men, at number two in our survey, is anal sex. Some might hypothesise that this has become more popular with men because of the prevalence of the act in pornography. But others might suggest that the growing acceptance of sexual diversity means that it's no longer frowned upon as it might have been 50 years ago. Either way, it's important to note that it did not feature in the women's top 10 list at all!



TOP TEN SEXUAL FANTASIES BY GENDER

1. THREESOME	1. THREESOME
2. SEX OUTSIDE	2. ANAL SEX
3. BONDAGE	3. USING A SEX TOY WITH MY PARTNER
4. ROLEPLAY SCENARIO	4. SEX OUTSIDE
5. SEX WITH MY PARTNER	5. BONDAGE
6. WEARING SEXY UNDERWEAR	6. ROLEPLAY SCENARIO
7. SEX OUTSIDE	7. SEX WITH MY PARTNER
8. SEX OUTSIDE OF MY ORIENTATION	8. HAVING SEX WITH SOMEONE ELSE
9. USING A TOY WITH MY PARTNER	9. WEARING SEXY UNDERWEAR
10. SEX IN A NOVEL PLACE	10. MAKING PORN WITH MY PARTNER

Conclusion

So we end as we began – sex should be fun and the majority of us are enjoying a good and satisfying sex life; but it is not without its problems. Most of us would agree that we're becoming an increasingly tolerant society when it comes to freedom of sexual expression. This said, many of us still struggle with insecurities, low self-confidence, physical sexual problems, the stress of day-to-day living and difficulties communicating with our partners. Helping couples and individuals enjoy better sex lives is a commitment shared by Relate and Ann Summers and clearly there's still more work to be done.



We are a business doing pleasure. A company run by women, for women. A virtuous circle of female empowerment that allows women and their partners from all walks of life to indulge their sex lives. First, our Parties opened the door for women, allowing them for the very first time to shop for sex products in a female friendly environment: their own homes. We were the first to bring erotic boutiques to the high street. Today we are the UK's biggest and most trusted adult retailer with over 150 stores and our market leading online store, annsummers.com, provides another enticing way to experience sexual liberation, experimentation and above all satisfaction.

Explore more at Annsummers.com



At Relate we are passionate about healthy and happy relationships and we believe that for most people, a fulfilling sex life is a key element to achieving that. That's why our fully qualified sex therapists help thousands of people each year to improve their sex lives. No matter what the problem is, we won't judge you or make you feel embarrassed, we will just help you work through your issues and build a more satisfying sex life as a result. We also offer relationship counselling, children and young people counselling, family counselling and a variety of workshops and courses. If you are worried about your sex life, or you'd like to improve your relationships, you can talk to us.

Visit www.relate.org.uk or call us on 0300 1300 1234.

References and methodology

*Channel 4 Great British Sex Survey, 2011 - <http://www.channel4.com/info/press/news/how-often-do-we-do-it-what-do-we-do-and-where-do-we-do-it>

**National Health and Social Lifestyle Survey, Laumann et al, 1999

***The Way We Are Now, Relate 2010

24,709 people took part in the sex census which ran at www.sexcensus.com in December 2011 and January 2012.

Please note, where appropriate statistics have been rounded up to the closest whole number.